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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: NOMINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE

REF: STATE 126072

11. (U) Summary. Argentina has a long history of courageous women leaders who have worked tirelessly to protect fundamental human rights, educate a new generation of citizens growing up in an era of democracy, and combat drug and human trafficking. This year's nominee, Nelida Borquez, is cast from the same mold. A survivor of domestic and family violence herself, she has championed for over 20 years women's rights to live free of domestic and sexual violence. Nelida's efforts to increase public and official awareness of violence against women in the impoverished Buenos Aires suburb of La Matanza have empowered battered women to come forward to denounce the crime. Acknowledging Nelida's efforts will help to raise public awareness of domestic violence, and may enhance prospects for strengthened cooperation from the Argentine government to protect victims, and punish the perpetrators, of this demeaning crime.

12. (U) Full legal name of nominee: Felipa "Nelida" Borquez

Job title/association: Program Director for the Prevention of Violence Against Women, Domestic and Sexual Violence
The Rosa Cazarreta House for Women

Date of birth: May 25, 1946

Country of birth: Argentina

Citizenship: Argentine

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13. (U) As a child, Nelida Borquez witnessed and was subject to violent abuse from her father. As a young woman, her husband inflicted physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. The cycle of violence continued after her husband died, when her subsequent domestic partner began abusing her. Like many victims of domestic violence, she suffered the abuse in silence, never daring to seek help.

14. (U) At the time, Argentina had just returned to democracy after seven years of brutal rule under a military dictatorship. Economic mismanagement, however, led to a hyperinflationary environment with ever-increasing levels of poverty, prompting Nelida Borquez to begin working with a group of community leaders in the impoverished Buenos Aires suburb of La Matanza to run soup kitchens to help meet their community's basic needs. While serving meals with other women in her community, they began to discuss their personal troubles only to discover that they had one tragic experience in common: they were all victims of domestic violence. To their surprise, many of the perpetrators were the very same community leaders with whom they

worked. These conversations helped Nelida realize she was not alone, and the women frequently turned to one another for support.

¶15. (U) Meanwhile, some elements of the federal government took notice of the good work they were doing in their communities and offered these women scholarships to pursue university studies. Many of them used the opportunity to study feminism and the law, and through their studies learned that the violence they suffered at home was not normal. It was a crime. Nelida and her colleagues resolved to do something about it by founding and establishing a women's-only community center in their hometown of La Matanza. The center provides psychological assistance to victims through group therapy, helps victims file complaints with the police, and conducts weekly violence prevention and anger management workshops with male aggressors.

¶16. (U) While the law prohibits domestic violence, including spousal abuse, violence against women is defined as a misdemeanor, and complaints are addressed in civil rather than criminal courts. The law only prescribes penalties for domestic violence when it involves crimes against sexual integrity, in which case the penalty can be as much as 20 years' imprisonment. However, lack of vigilance on the part of the police and the judicial system often led to a lack of protection for victims. Machismo, or the belief in male domination over women, seems to be the cultural norm in many parts of Argentina. Such attitudes not only enable domestic violence, but also sustain it since many police and other authorities have demonstrated a reluctance to intervene in what they consider a private matter beyond the reach of the law. According to local press reports, family violence in Buenos Aires city has increased 369% from 1995 to 2008. In August, Amnesty International reported that a woman dies every two days in Argentina as a result of domestic violence. The organization estimated that at least 81 women had been killed in Argentina by their spouse, former partner, or other family member from January-August 2008. In La Matanza alone, approximately 10,700 complaints of domestic violence were filed from 2005-2007 according to the local NGO Women's Agenda. Even these statistics may not accurately capture the magnitude of the problem, as domestic violence is a hidden crime with many cases unreported.

¶17. (U) Nelida's efforts to increase public and official awareness of the problem in La Matanza have empowered battered women to come forward to denounce the crime. Under Nelida's direction, the community center has since grown to become a network of 14 centers throughout the city of La Matanza. They assist thousands of victims a month. With the modest financial assistance from the city of La Matanza, UNIFEM, and the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, the center now offers programs to help victims become survivors. To break the victim's financial dependence on their abusers, the center also teaches victims and other members of the community sewing skills, which they can then use to make garments for the center's cooperative, work for themselves, or work for a local sewing factory. They will soon offer classes in graphic design and printmaking as well.

¶18. (U) Nelida Borquez's tireless advocacy for women's rights has succeeded in bringing public and official attention to domestic violence. When she learned that police stations in La Matanza were not filing domestic violence complaints and were instead referring victims to the only Women's Police Station in town, she launched a public campaign to educate women of their rights, and the police of their obligation, to file such complaints at the nearest police station. Although she, her staff, and the victims who seek assistance from the centers have received numerous threats from the perpetrators of domestic violence, they labor on, thus far, without incident.

¶19. (U) Acknowledging Nelida's efforts will help to raise public awareness of domestic violence, and may enhance prospects for strengthened cooperation from the Argentine government to protect the victims, and punish the perpetrators, of this demeaning crime. Such recognition could help bolster the Argentine Supreme Court's recent precedent-setting efforts to improve women's access to justice through its new Office of Domestic Violence inaugurated in September. This is a pilot project to improve access to justice for domestic violence victims in Buenos Aires City.

¶10. (U) Buenos Aires emboffs for women's issues are Heidi Gomez, gomezhn@state.gov and Mara Tekach, tekachmm@state.gov.

WAYNE